

THE TRINITY IDEA.

BY THE EDITOR.

THE SIGNIFICANCE of the trinity relation is strongly marked in the symbolism of religious doctrines, in philosophy, and in the various phenomena of nature. Three members are the necessary constituents of a syllogism. Every spot in space is naturally determined from any point of reference by three coördinates, implying that the possibility of moving in infinite directions is for measuring purposes reducible to three dimensions, and history teaches us that the progress of civilisation is effected by a reconciliation of contrasts, which appears (as Hegel puts it) in a series of (1) a thesis, (2) an antithesis, and (3) their combination.¹

In addition to the important part which the trinity idea plays in abstract reasoning, we find that it is an indispensable conception in nature. When trying to comprehend the constant flux of phenomena as manifestations of immutable laws, we distinguish (1) the eternal norms of being, viz., the laws of nature, the *Urgrund*, the βῦδος, the creative and formative power, the conditions of existence, religiously called "the Father of all life;" (2) the actualisation of existence in concrete things and living creatures, the phenomena in which the laws of nature are manifested, the avatars or incarnations of the creator, the evolution of life, the reality of the world-process, which is consummated in the sinless man, the perfectly Enlightened One, the God-man; and (3) the end and aim of life, the ideal, the aspiration of reaching a goal that animates life and gives purpose to its endeavors. These three aspects of life (1) the What, (2) the Whence, (3) the Whither; (1) *Grund*, (2) *Ursache*, (3) *Zweck*; the (1) ground or *raison d'être*, (2) the constant flux of causation, and (3) the direction or tendency of existence, are three phases of one and the same reality; they are a

¹ For particulars see *Primer of Philosophy*, pp. 100-102.

personal, but supersonal, not a concrete individual will, but an omnipresent effectiveness, not *a* God, but God.

It is certainly a remarkable coincidence that several among the higher religions teach the trinity idea in one or another form. Only the Jews and Mohammedans are strict Unitarians, the Parsee faith is almost dualistic, and the religion of ancient Egypt, at least in one of its phases, exhibits the peculiar doctrine of a quadrinity. But the ancient Babylonians, the Brahmans, the Buddhists, and the old paganism of the Germanic races, as explained in the two Eddas, teach a trinity of their God.

The Edda speaks of Alfadhur as Har, the High One, Ifn-Har, the equally High One, and Thridhi or the Third One. But this trinity doctrine is not so clear as the trinity doctrines of the East, nor are we quite sure that it is not a later product which might have originated under Christian influence.

The old Babylonians worshipped the trinity of Anu, Ea, and Bel; Ea being quite analogous to the Christian God the Father, and Bel (also called Merodach) to Christ, God the Son, for he is the saviour, and the conqueror of Tiamat, the Evil One. Says Mr. Budge in his excellent booklet, *Babylonian Life and History*, p. 127 :

"The omnipresent and omnipotent Marduk (Merodach) was the god 'who went before Ea' and was the healer and mediator for mankind. He revealed to mankind the knowledge of Ea; in all incantations he is invoked as the god 'mighty to save' against evil and ill."

Brahm, the highest God of Brahmanism, representing the All, or the abstract idea of being, is conceived as a trinity, which is called Trimûrti (Fig. 1), consisting of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, three divine presences who in many respects bear quite a close resemblance to the Christian Trinity. The most famous ancient representation of the Trimûrti is found near Bombay in the caves of Elephanta, where three massive faces growing from one body are sculptured in the rock.

Kâlidâsa, the Shakespeare of ancient India, best known in the West as the author of *Sakuntala*, says :

"In these three persons the one god was shown,—
Each first in place, each last,—not one alone;
Of Shiva, Vishnu, Brahma, each may be
First, second, third among the blessed Three."

Brahma (Fig. 2) is the creator and the father of all, commonly represented with four heads; Vishnu (Fig. 6) is the divine revela-



Fig. 2. BRAHMA.
(Fragment of a car. Musée Guimet.)



Fig. 3. SHIVA-TRIMURTI
Leaning on the linga, the symbol of the
creative faculty.
(Fragment of a car. Musée Guimet.)



Fig. 4. SHIVA WITH PARVATI
On Nanda, the sacred bull (Musée Guimet).



Fig. 5. SHIVA DANCING SURROUNDED BY A HALO OF
FLAMES. (Bronze Statue. Musée Guimet.)



Fig. 6. VISHNU NARASIMHA.
(Fragment of a car. Musée Guimet.)



Fig. 7. KRISHNA
As a shepherd lad playing the flute [the flute
is missing]. (Bronze statue, Musée Guimet.)

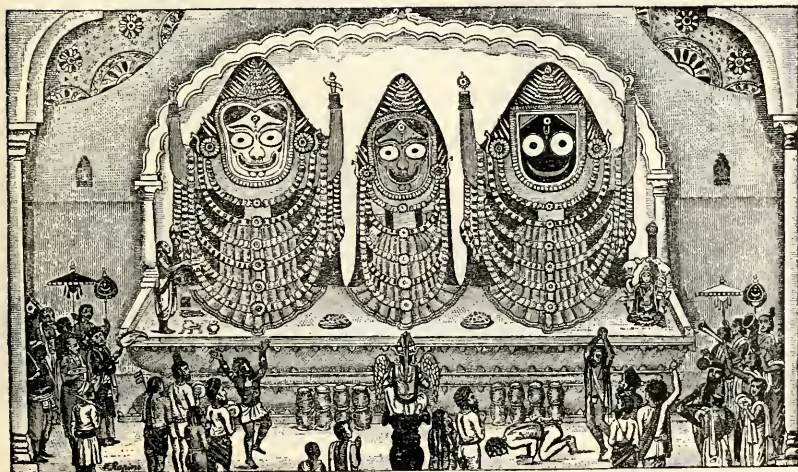


Fig. 8. JAGANNATH WITH HIS TWO COMPANIONS. (After Schlagintweit.)



Fig. 9. LAO-TSZE—BUDDHA—CONFUCIUS.

D, D, D, philosophers, and E a hero. F, the Chinese dragon, covered with the sacred tortoise shell. G, G, G, H, Gods. I, K, L, M, Demons.

After an old Chinese painting, reproduced by Kirchner, and from Kirchner by Pickart.]

tion manifesting itself in incarnations called "avatars"¹; and Shiva (Figs. 3, 4, 5) is the destroyer and regenerator, the transformer.

Vishnu in his incarnations, especially as Krishna (Figs. 8 and 11) and as Jagannâth² (Fig. 8), is dearest to the Hindu heart, for he is the God that has become flesh, and he is full of love and compassion. Brahma and Shiva, not unlike the Jehovah of the Old Testament, are gods of wrath, but the Vishnu (the Hindu Christ) is full of compassion, of meekness, and humility. This is illustrated in a crude legend which according to a story from the Bhâgavata-purâna runs as follows:³

"A dispute once arose among the sages which of the three gods was greatest. They applied to the greatest of all sages—Bhrigu—to determine the point. He undertook to put all three gods to a severe test. He went first to Brahma and omitted all obeisance. The god's anger blazed forth, but he was at length pacified. Next he went to the abode of Shiva, and omitted to return the god's salutation. The irascible god was enraged, his eyes flashed fire, and he raised his Trident weapon to destroy the sage. But the god's wife, Parvati, interceded for him. Lastly, Bhrigu went to the heaven of Vishnu, whom he found asleep. To try his forbearance, he gave the god a good kick on his breast, which awoke him. Instead of showing anger, Vishnu asked Bhrigu's pardon for not having greeted him on his first arrival. Then he declared he was highly honored by the sage's blow. It had imprinted an indelible mark of good fortune on his breast. He trusted the sage's foot was not hurt, and began to rub it gently. 'This,' said Bhrigu, 'is the mightiest god; he overpowers his enemies by the most potent of all weapons—gentleness and generosity.'"

In spite of the lack of dignity that marks this myth, it reminds one of the story of Golgatha; there, too, the wounds in the breast where the lance pierced the Crucified, became, together with the four other wounds, the symbol of the highest and divinest holiness.

Krishna is God manifesting himself as the divine hero, teacher, and saviour. The Krishna legends bear many strange resemblances

¹ Vishnu incarnates himself in ten avatars. The illustration (Fig. 6) represents him as Narasimha, or the lion-man, according to the legend that the heretical king Hiranyakasipa, ridiculing the idea of Vishnu's omnipresence, asked mockingly: "Is Vishnu in this pillar?" whereupon the pillar was rent asunder, the god came out in the shape of a lion-man and tore the scoffer to pieces.

² Jagannâth is commonly misrepresented in Christian countries, and there is much talk of the custom of people throwing themselves under the wheels of the big Car of Jagannâth. There is no truth in the tale. Says Sir Monier Monier-Williams, an enthusiastic worker in the field of Christian apologetics: "It is usual for missionaries to speak with horror of the self-immolation alleged to take place under the Car of Jagannâth (Krishna). But if deaths occur, they must be accidental, as self-destruction is wholly opposed both to the letter and spirit of the Vaishnava religion." (*Brahmanism and Hinduism*, p. 118.)

Jagannâth, the Vishnu incarnation of mercy and compassion, always appears with two companions. As to their grotesque appearance, we must consider that the Hindu tries to describe the divine by things uncommon and extraordinary.

³ See Sir M. M. Williams's *Brahmanism and Hinduism*, p. 46.



Fig. 10. THE CHRISTIAN TRINITY AFTER THE CONCEPTION OF OLD GERMAN MASTERS.
(Reproduced from Muther.)



Fig. 11. KRISHNA NURSED BY DEVAKI.
After an old and richly-colored Hindu painting. [Reproduced from Moore's Hindu Pantheon, plate 59.]

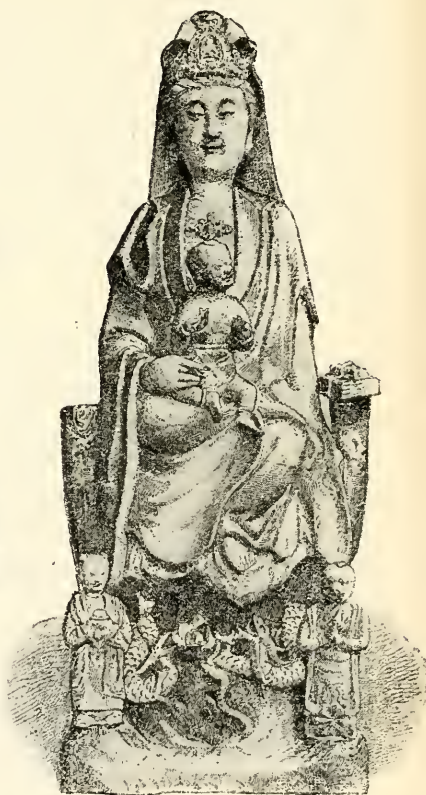


Fig. 12. QUAN-YIN.
Buddha's incarnation as a mother's love.
White Chinese Porcelain (Musée Guimet).



Fig. 13. THE BUDDHIST TRINITY (Japanese).
The Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha.
Carved wood; Musée Guimet.



Fig. 14. THE CHRISTIAN TRINITY
From the *Iconographie Chrétienne*. [Reproduced
from Bastian's *Ethnol. Bilderbuch*, plate xvii.]



Fig. 15. MARY'S CORONATION.
By Ambrogio Fossano, called Borgognone. Formerly
in the S. Simpliciano at Milan, now at the Brera. [After
Lübke.]



Fig. 16. THE CORONATION OF MARY.

After H. F., an unknown Old German artist of Augsburg. (Reproduced from Muther.)



Fig. 17. THE TRINITY.

From Hans Schauffeleius's prayer book *Via Felicitatis*. (Reproduced from Muther.)



Fig. 18. THE HOLY TRINITY IN THE VATICAN.
After Pietro Berrettini. Reproduced from *Il Vaticano*, plate xx.

to stories in the lives of both Buddha and Christ. The most curious among them are Krishna's escape from a massacre of children, arranged by a Hindu Herod for the purpose of killing the newborn god, and his transfiguration shortly before his death. Pictures of the Krishna child at the bosom of his mother remind us very much of similar subjects in Buddhistic and Christian art (Compare Fig. 11 with Fig. 12). Well known is also the thoughtful legend that while Krishna plays the flute (Fig. 6), every one of the dancing shepherdesses believes that the swain whom she embraces is the god himself.

The Buddhist trinity (Fig. 13) is different from the trinity of the Brahmans. The Buddhists take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, every one of them being a manifestation of the bôdhi, the enlightenment that leads to the salvation of Nirvâna. Not exactly the same, but a similar idea, is expressed in the doctrine of the three personalities of Buddha: (1) the Sambhôga-kâya, the personality of bliss, which means Buddha as the eternal law of the bôdhi; (2) the Nirmâna-kâya, the personality of transformations, or Buddha as he manifests himself in evolution; and (3) the Dharma-kâya, the personality of religious truth, which is the unfoldment of Buddha in the Buddhist doctrines.¹

In China there is a peculiar trinity of the great religious leaders, Lao-Tsze, Buddha, and Confucius (Fig. 9). Although Taoists, Buddhists, and Confucianists are not free from jealousy among themselves, the systems of the three masters are not regarded as antagonistic but rather as complementary. Their trinity appears to be accidental, and yet it, too, is an expression of the triune relation of philosophy, religion, and ethics.

The Christian doctrine of the trinity was definitely settled at the time of the Council of Nice. In the beginning of the Christian Church there was a wavering between two conceptions, one of which may be called gnostic, the other canonical. The gnostic conception, formed after the pattern of father, mother, and child, represented the Deity as a trinity of (1) God the Creator, (2) Sophia or the Divine Wisdom, and (3) the Messiah, also called the son of David, the son of man, the son of woman, and the son of God. Some gnostic authors use the terms Sophia and Logos as perfect synonyms, but among the Christians of the third century the

¹ In the Buddhist mythology of China and Japan the trinity idea is very prominent. A Chinese work of five thin volumes, kindly presented me by Mr. Jos. M. Wade of Boston, contains among its numerous illustrations of Buddhist saints and deities a great number of trinity figures. The title of the work shows four characters, signifying "Buddha-Image Table-Collection," which means "A Collection of Illustrations of Buddhist Images."

term Sophia is entirely abandoned, and the trinity of God the Father, God the Son, or Christ, as the incarnation of the Logos, and the Holy Spirit, becomes firmly established as the canonical doctrine of the Church (Figs. 10 and 14-18). Nevertheless, the gnostic conception of Sophia, the bride of God, reappears in the deification of Mary, who sometimes, although rarely, takes the place of the Holy Ghost (Fig. 17), and sometimes is represented as an additional person in the trinity (Fig. 15), which, however, in artistic representations, makes the Holy Ghost appear as the relation that obtains between God, Christ, and Mary.¹

The Brahman, the Buddhist, and the Christian trinity conceptions are in many respects very different, but the more instructive and remarkable are their agreements which teach us that the trinity idea is deeply founded in the nature of things.

¹ The old Christian Trinities (e. g., Fig. 14) bear a close resemblance to Hindu representations of the Trimûrti. The old German Masters represent God the Father as an emperor holding counsel with his son, the king, on the government of the world (e. g., Fig. 18). There are a few pictures which seem to convey the idea that God the Father, Mary, and Christ form a trinity (see Fig. 15), but the instances in which (as in Fig. 17) the Holy Ghost is entirely replaced by Mary, are rare.